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A Christian Islamist?

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In this review, the author discusses Volf's paradigm from an Islamic perspective, and compares and contrasts some of Volf's assertions with those of his avowed counterpart: the Muslim fundamentalist Syed Qutb. Some interesting questions are raised, and the differences between these two paradigms, it is claimed, is not as great as what might initially appear.

Keywords: Islamism; Islamic state; secularism; Qutb.

Miroslav Volf's latest work is an eloquent defense of the idea of bringing Christianity back into the public arena, while still retaining respect for and affirmation of other cultures and faith. There are other reviewers that have reviewed this work from theological and political perspectives. Mine will be neither. I do not intend to critique the work, nor offer a detailed analysis of it. Rather, as a Muslim theologian and academic, and a keen observer of the dialogue between "East" and "West," I would like to offer some candid thoughts that came to my own mind as I read Volf's work. These thoughts revolve around the assumed universality of the model that Volf attempts to defend, and the inherent assumption that any alternative model, and in particular an Islamist model, must necessarily be detrimental to society.

The purpose of this brief excursus is to offer an alternative view, shaped by my own religious experience and understandings as a Muslim theologian who has spent half of his life in America and half in the Middle East. This is not *the* Islamic perspective of matters (can any one person

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unilaterally propose one Islamic answer?), but rather *an* Islamic perspective. Also note that while I might be asking very probing questions or challenging certain concepts, this by no means suggests that I am necessarily *opposed* to what Volf is arguing. Rather, my goal is to bring to the table a worldview that is typically dismissed, rarely understood, and many times even feared, in the hopes that that worldview might as least be admitted as a part of a reasonable conversation. I do not profess to have answers to the questions or concerns that I pose, but I do believe these concerns need to be kept in mind before any meaningful dialogue takes place between the Western and Muslim world.

Volf begins and ends his work by quoting Syed Qutb, and portraying him as a paradigmatic religious totalitarian, albeit of the Muslim variety. Qutb becomes the "other" by which Volf seeks to define himself and his proposed Christian alternative to Qutb's vision. On a number of occasions, Volf stresses that Qutb does not represent mainstream Islam, and that he has been criticized and refuted by many Muslims.

Yet, recent events in the Arab world, and the aftereffects of the "Arab Spring," show that Qutb's thoughts (and even the party he supported: the Muslim Brotherhood) are not only alive and healthy, they are *mainstream* in many countries! In Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, the Brotherhood has either outright won the elections or has emerged as a powerful force that cannot be ignored by the ruling elites and secularists. In Morocco and Jordan, the ruling dynasties have had to reach some type of compromise with Qutb's modern-day followers, as they represent the most potent force that challenges their thrones. The oil-rich Qatar has spent billions of dollars underwriting various factions of the Brotherhood throughout the world. Quite frankly, events on the street show that it is not Qutb's appeal that is marginal; it is the voices that are critical of Qutb that are in the minority. Even more pointedly, the many critics of Qutb themselves are only unified by their opposition to Qutb, and not by a united sense of values or a common *modus operandi*. Secularists, Arab nationalists, socialists and liberal Islamic parties will need to find more in common than an enemy if they wish to gain influence over their society. In contrast, Qutb's thought as envisioned by the Islamist parties have, by and large, a unified sense of where matters should be heading and how they should proceed onwards.

This religious zeal is in stark contrast to one of the primary themes of Volf's work: the exhortation to his fellow Christians to become more involved with their faith in the public domain (see, for example, his earnest plea on p. 79). Indeed, an entire chapter (Chapter 2: Idleness) is dedicated to chastising the notion that faith should be inactive and "idle," relegated to the private sphere of an individual's thoughts and devotions. As is patently clear when one looks at the Muslim world, there is

no need for such an exhortation. If anything, most Western observers fear the opposite: that the Muslim world takes its faith too seriously and cannot seem to keep it in check. A chapter on religious idleness would be superfluous in any work directed to Muslim societies. Even as Volf argues that the idleness of Christians in the West should be bemoaned, he also laments the enthusiasm and zeal of the followers of Qutb. It is in attempting to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable that I engage my own thoughts.

Before I proceed, a personal disclaimer is necessary. I am not and have never been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a Muslim theologian and cleric I do have my own criticisms of the Brotherhood both on theological and methodological grounds. As I raise these points, I do not wish to appear, merely by pointing out what I view as potential flaws in Volf's assumptions, that I am somehow siding with "the other" (in this case, Qutb). In other words, I do not subscribe to the Manichean view so boldly propagated by Bush, "You are either with us or against us." Rather, my goal is to merely challenge the fundamental assumptions that most Western authors who engage with Islam/Islamism (and this includes, to some extent, Volf) consciously or unconsciously imbibe. Once again, the goal is to attempt to understand an alternative paradigm from the one embraced by most of us in the West, and not to defend Qutb's vision of Islam.

Volf views Qutb's message as one of totalitarianism, and in some ways it is. Because Qutb believes that God is truly Sovereign over the Creation, and has revealed a Divine Guidance to serve as humankind's ultimate authority (viz., the Qur'an), Qutb argues that the ultimate goal of every Muslim should be to recognize God as the ultimate deity. Qutb links this directly to the Muslim profession of faith: "There is no deity worthy of worship other than Allah," which, Qutb argues, includes recognizing the law of God as the only legitimate law. After all, says Qutb, what right does one man have to impose his laws on other men? And is not one of the sole rights of God the right of ultimate legislation? Who else can act as an arbiter for human disputes? And what other authority will be so universally accepted by believers other than God? Hence, argues Qutb, any who oppose God, or the law of God, are manifestations of the ultimate ignorance (or *jahiliyya*), and must be opposed with the heart, the tongue and, at times, the hand. God's law is the only law that man can and should accept, and this is the only logical and rational corollary of believing in a God who reveals truths to His creation.

Reading Qutb's logic is chilling for many modern Western readers. It reminds them of the stranglehold the Church once had on their own past. It conjures up images of the Taliban, with their medieval punishments

being voyeuristically broadcast around the world in modern soccer stadiums. Yet, the results of the Arab Spring clearly prove that this same message of Qutb[2] clearly resonates with large segments of the Muslim world—segments that would equally abhor the religious extremism of the Taliban and the secular irreligiousness of the West.

There are many ways to interpret this difference of perspective. For a large segment of the Western world, it is easy to dismiss this sympathy as an indication of the backwardness and inherent religious intolerance of Islam and Muslims. Claims that "Islam still has not had its Reformation," or that "Enlightenment" has not yet landed on the shores of Islam, are heard often. Yet, I argue that such questions and concerns reflect an extremely skewed understanding of the Muslim world. The fact of the matter, first demonstrated so powerfully by Edward Said in his paradigm-shifting work *Orientalism*, is that the Occident has an inherently biased and aggrandized view of itself and its values, and feels the need to constantly project itself onto other societies. The modern political and religious thought of the Western world is but *one* recent development in human history, and cannot and should not be taken as *the* universal archetype to which all societies must conform.

To be more specific: the very premise of Volf's book is the acceptance of a secular society where religions cannot offer ultimate truths without affirming those truths via non-religious mechanisms (a sort of Rawlsian "overlapping consensus"). All that a religious group can do, Volf proposes, is argue its premise passionately and hope that a majority of people, regardless of their faith, are convinced by said argument. If that premise is based purely on a faith-claim, it must somehow be translated into a faith-neutral reality so that others can accept this claim as truth. In this paradigm, power lies with the people, and a personal truth (known

2. Should it be assumed that Syed Qutb is somehow alone in his views, the reader is referred to the writings of Abu-l-Ala al-Mawdudi (d. 1979) of Pakistan, and Ayatullah Ruhullah al-Khomeini (d. 1987) of Iran, to name two more. All three of them, despite their fundamental differences, argued that the teachings of Islam should be the *only* source of legislation and the *sole* authority from which political and ethical norms of a Muslim government are derived. It is my thesis that the reason why these figures (and their followers) were and remain so popular among such a large spectrum of Sunni and Shiite Muslims is for the simple reason that the broad essentials of that thesis are, in fact, an accurate reflection of how Islam has been traditionally and historically understood. By that I mean the basic message that Islam is a theological, social, moral and legal movement that should, in an ideal circumstance, bring about a society that embodies and enforces Islamic values. In contrast, those who are advocating a secular version of Islam—figures whom Volf quotes as being critics of Qutb, such as Abdullahi al-Naimi and, to a lesser extent, Khaled Abou ElFadl—have very little resonance with mainstream Muslims, and are more read by non-Muslims than fellow Muslims.

via religion) cannot be instantiated into public policy until that truth is acknowledged as truth by the public.

There are many consequences to such an archetypal system. Perhaps the most obvious is the inevitable change in policies and values from era to era. One only needs to see how same-sex relations have been viewed for most of human history, and compare that with the changes that our own generation is witnessing, to understand this phenomenon. Another consequence of this system would be occasions when the "truth" (as deemed truth by a particular group) cannot be acted upon because it was not deemed to be truth by others. This is a sacrifice that those living in the West have grown accustomed to, even if, at times, issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage highlight the inherent tensions of this system.

But what if one of us were to be challenged to step outside of our own world-view and historicize it? Would it be possible to acknowledge that the very paradigm that one takes for granted is a fragile and constructed one, pieced together by accidents of European history, and not by any overall universal human mechanism?

It is an undeniable fact that modern secular democracy is a uniquely Western construct, shaped and formed by the problems and strife of medieval Europe. Volf himself acknowledges that a primary precursor to the emergence of secularism was the religious wars that plagued Christian Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (38). Two other causes that allowed the political thought of secularism to flourish were: the inherent tensions that existed between the Church and science, and the Reformation movement of Martin Luther, which severely curbed the power of the Church. This jumbling of factors (along with many others) was a necessary backdrop from which the figures of the Enlightenment could spring forth.

If secularism is the product of a particular historical phenomenon, what then of societies who never went through the eclectic mix that medieval Europe witnessed? Most Muslims view their past with a sense of romantic nostalgia,[3] and consider the most *glorious* days of their civilization to be when Caliphs ruled in accordance with the laws of the Shariah. It was during that time (or so they envision) that science, philosophy, and

3. I am by no means attempting to be an apologist here. I do not claim that medieval Islamic societies were some type of utopia. However, I do believe it is safe to fairly posit that Islamic societies did not witness any of the tensions that its Christian counterpart did. There was a flourishing of knowledge and science; by and large there were no mass protests against the principle of a theocratic government; and Muslim intellectuals felt no need to discard or radically alter the *status quo*. Muslims did feel some sense of being a united polity, even if racial and tribal tensions existed. All of this would change after the advent of colonialism and the importation of the Western notions of nation-state and secularism.

technology flourished. For most Muslims, there was never a need for a Reformation because Islam never experienced a Dark Age.

To rephrase the question: if secularism is a uniquely Western concept, is the official separation of religion and politics a necessary component to a successful society? Most Muslim societies (and all Islamist parties) clearly do not think so. True, different Muslim groups have diverse views on the precise *role* that religion should play, but it is safe to say that the vast majority of Muslim societies would wish to ban, say, prostitution and the display of public nudity, merely on the basis of religion, without feeling the need to resort to an areligious, neutral, justification. This is but one example; there are many more that can be given.

Ultimately, citizens of Western civilization will have to come to terms with the reality that other civilizations can and will flourish and prosper in a manner not shaped by the writings of Rousseau, Hobbes, Mill, and Jefferson. What that system of governance will look like is something that each society will have to work out, if it is allowed to do so.[4] This alternative system of governance, just like its Western counterpart, will be an ongoing, ever-evolving process. And for Muslim societies, that system will almost inevitably be shaped by their religion. Hence, the clear line that divides "religion" from "politics" is not as clear in the Muslim world as it is in its Christian counterpart.

But what of the charge that a faith that forces itself onto others cannot be a genuine faith? Both Christians and Muslims would agree that a faith that is coerced is not a faith that God approves of. As Volf argues, "Properly understood, the Christian faith is neither coercive nor idle" (54). And Muslims would cite the Qur'an: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256). In a passage addressed to the Prophet, Muslims are asked to reflect on the religious diversity of humankind: "If your Lord had willed,

4. By this I refer to the hampering effect that colonization had on developing countries in general, and Muslim countries in particular. Around the turn of the last century, over 90 percent of Muslim countries were under the direct rule of foreign powers; some of these countries only managed to gain their independence in the latter part of the twentieth century. The aftermath of colonization has been studied by many authors, and need not concern us here. I merely wish to point out that some of the most important legacies of colonization were: the creation of a fragile and frequently imaginary national identity on each of the newly-founded countries; the supplanting of Islamic law with Western systems of governance; and the enfranchisement, empowerment, and support of an elite, typically irreligious, group of locals who were more sympathetic to the values and policies of the colonizer over and against their own colonized peoples. In our own era, even though direct colonization has been eliminated, it is an undeniable reality that Western superpowers continue to exert a powerful influence on both the participants and policies of the governments of Muslim countries. All of these factors, and more, cannot be ignored when one wishes to compare the Western world with Muslim societies.

then surely everyone on earth would be a believer. So, will you force people until they believe?!" (11:99). Clearly, compelling people to believe is something neither Christianity nor Islam sanctions.

To answer this question, one can reply that a distinction must be made between personal faith, which we can all agree needs to stem from the heart, and public good, which need not stem from each individual heart in order to benefit society. Many religious people will acknowledge, for example, that pornography is harmful to a society's well-being. Not only is it demeaning to women, it is destructive to healthy marriages and perpetrates ideas of beauty and sexiness that most women simply cannot live up to. So, just as the United States has a special department whose primary purpose is to eliminate the production and selling of drugs and other physically harmful substances (the DEA), it is not too much of a stretch to understand that an Islamic system, by any interpretation, would have a branch of government that would proscribe the production and public distribution of pornography, as it would view it a psychologically harmful substance. One can add here that almost all civilized countries have public anti-nudity laws: if most states of America still arrest a woman for baring her breasts in public, claiming that this is harmful to society, why is it difficult to understand that an Islamic system would ban other types of nudity? No doubt, a very real fear exists that such a government would go to the extremes of the Taliban and beat women who uncover their hair, for example. However, this potentially extreme example should not lead us to the opposite: to ignore and hence condone pornography, an immoral and disgusting genre of visual materials, under the guise of "free speech."

Another, more controversial, example is that of abortion. Every rational person will claim that a mother has no right to kill a healthy child after it is born, because the life of the child cannot be taken away by anyone, including the one who gave birth to it. The elusive question, though, of when "life" begins simply has no conclusive *scientific* or *ethical* answer. However, many Christians and Muslims do believe that they have a *religious* answer to that question.[5] Therefore, just as we cannot expect a person of conscience to stand by when a mother attempts to murder her child, how can we expect a person of faith, who believes with every fiber in her body that a fetus is a living child, to idly stand by when a mother

5. Interestingly enough, most Muslims believe, based on a saying attributed to the Prophet, that life is conceived after four months (120 days) in the womb. Before this time, however, the fetus is a respected and honorable entity and should not be harmed without legitimate cause, since it shall be the receptacle of life. Hence, the majority position among Sunni jurists is that aborting the fetus before four months is allowed in extreme cases (such as rape), but would never be allowed after this stage unless the life of the mother herself is in jeopardy. Note that there are other positions as well.

wants to kill that child? This ongoing challenge of the inherent tension between Western morality and legality does not have a simple solution. The Islamist worldview, on the other hand, does have a more straightforward solution.

The point here is that no Western theory of knowledge (or of politics, or ethics) will accept the possibility of a Divine Revelation as an ultimate source of knowledge. Hence, any modern state built on such an epistemological premise will preclude *a priori* the legitimacy of a system that might indeed believe in a Divine Truth. Inasmuch as Islam (or, at least, mainstream, orthodox Islam still believed in and practiced by large segments of the Muslim world) rests on the axiom that God exists; that this God has sent prophets with a message for humans; and that this message is accessible and understood by those who accept it, it will be psychologically and rationally impossible to expect Muslims to ignore these axioms as they derive their laws and system of government.

Quite frankly, such an argument could even by championed from within the Judaic and Christian traditions. After all, some could argue, Moses was not demonstrating religious freedom when he burned the Golden Calf and forced the Israelites to drink its ashes. And did not Jesus himself, angered at the travesty of usury being practiced in the House of God, overturn the tables of the money-exchangers? Was this not an imposition of morality by force, based on religious truth? No less should be expected from true prophets—why then, Islamists argue, should the followers of the prophets not collectively take on that same role?

It must be admitted that there is a kernel of irrefutable logic in the claim that those who believe in a Divine Truth should act by it when they are in a position of power. Volf himself argues that a faith that does not translate into public welfare and good is not a very effective faith, nor is it a faith that would be meaningful to a society (he summarizes this very eloquently in four points: see p. 36). But what Volf does not address, or perhaps even realize, is that *this same argument, taken to its logical conclusion, is essentially the argument of Qutb himself*.

The Islamist paradigm is one that has rational and textual appeal for many Muslims (this also explains its popularity). Some of those appeals are echoed by Volf himself, albeit in a much more toned-down manner. Instead of summarily dismissing that paradigm, it would be wiser for us to understand that it has a place and function for the societies from within which it emanated.

One final, relatively minor quibble about the work. Volf very justifiably condemns the acts of terrorism committed in the name of Islam. However, there is no mention of the numerous studies that have proven that "Islamic terrorism" does not emerge from the teachings of the Qur'an, but

rather from the very legitimate anger that is caused by extremely worldly and palpable political and social causes.[6] Without these socio-political factors, "Islamic terrorism" would not exist, as it has not existed for most of Islam's history. The condemnation of "Islamic terrorism," if it is expected to achieve any tangible results, must go hand in hand with the condemnation of the political and social circumstances (most of which has resulted in similar or worse loss of life) which generate the anger that terrorists need to commit such crimes.

I am, however, in complete agreement with Volf when he says that the cure against violence in faith lies in increased religious zeal (40). Indeed, Saudi Arabia has launched a relatively successful program of de-radicalizing repentant *jihadists* by actually immersing them in a religious environment, and has allowed scholars to lecture them on the proper understandings of the text pertaining to *jihad*. It is an undeniable reality that, almost without exception, the leaders and members of radical *jihadist* groups are self-taught pseudo-scholars of the texts. Mainstream, trained scholars throughout the world, of all schisms and groups, have denounced the tactics and methods of al-Qaida and similar groups. It is also a documented fact that most of those who attempt suicide attacks or sign up for terrorist causes were raised in irreligious environments; they typically live un-Islamic lives until they rediscover the faith and feel the need to over-commit and make up for their previous lifestyles. Those who are raised in stable religious environments rarely turn to terrorism.

In conclusion, Professor Volf's work makes a cogent and passionate plea for a particular target audience: Christians living in a secular and democratic West who feel that their faith should not be translated into public service. Volf argues that faith *should* play a vital role in the public life of a society. As an American Muslim, I have no problem embracing this premise, and upholding the separation of church and state as mandated

6. There are simply too many works in this genre, but perhaps the most accredited would be the works authored by Michael Scheuer, who was the head of the CIA department assigned to capture Bin Laden in the 1990s. His most famous work is *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror* (New York: Potomac Books, 2007). Note here that I am not arguing that Islam is a pacifist religion: quite the contrary, Islam does have a *jus ad bellum* that radical *jihadists* invoke.

Jihad as a religious war to defend the faith is a Qur'anic reality. Militant radicals such as al-Qaeda view the assaults on Islamic lands, and American hegemony in particular, especially as demonstrated by its support of Israeli policies against the Palestinians, as legitimizing a *jihad* to defend fellow Muslims. Hence, it is not the Qur'an that provokes such anger: it is American foreign policy (or what Scheuer and others in the CIA call "blowback"). However, most mainstream Muslim scholars disagree with al-Qaeda's understanding of the texts, and claim their methodology of targeting innocents is not justified.

by our Constitution. I welcome such participation, by Americans of all faiths, and I believe that Jews, Christians, and Muslims can truly impact society in a positive manner if they embrace this principle. Yet, as a part of the global Muslim community, I cannot help but point out that the book inherently assumes, even if it does not explicitly state it so, that the paradigm for which it was written is the only legitimate paradigm, and that any and all systems that oppose it (such as Islamism) must somehow be regressive or at least inhibiting to human development. And *that* is a premise that I, along with hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world, cannot subscribe to.

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